



Political Game

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THE DEER HUNTER

existent, that he cannot illuminate the character. When Michael climbs a mountain to hunt, it's a Holy Mountain, a mystical aerie straight out of Leni Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light*. Russian choral singing underscores his unhurried pursuit of a kingly stag, which he fells according to his code, with one clean shot. But besides killing an ARVN soldier for wantonly murdering a peasant family, what else has he done in battle? Has he taken his foes, like his deer, in one clean shot? Hellbent for mystery, Cimino makes him a cipher.

Not until the torture sequence does Michael come alive, just in time to give the movie narrative drive. Snarling defiantly at the Viet Cong, goading his friends to risk Russian roulette, putting the gun to his own temple and pulling the trigger, he boldly takes the enemy off guard, kills them, and lead the others to safety past incredible obstacles. Now De Niro erupts with the volcanic force that has marked several of his movie parts; but this time the ferocious power bursts from a sane, resourceful man in full, steely command of his strength and skills. It may be the most profound study of raw courage ever put on film. Yet the cataclysm proves to be too extreme for even the most extraordinary individ-

ual heroism. When Michael tries to pull Nick back from the degradation of the gambling hell, his pleas and his willingness to risk his life again with Russian roulette are overwhelmingly stirring. But Nick, sketchily written but eerily acted by Christopher Walken, is a burnt-out case. When he suicidally fires into his skull, the annihilation of not only his life but Michael's hope, too, makes the film a genuine tragedy.

—MICHAEL DEMPSEY

POLITICAL GAME

The Deer Hunter has been hailed as "the greatest antiwar movie since *The Grand Illusion*" (Stephen Farber in *New West*, 18 Dec. 1978) and as "a film of great courage and overwhelming emotional power" that places its director Cimino "right at the center of our film culture" (Jack Kroll in *Newsweek*, 11 Dec. 1978). Undeniably, Michael Cimino's direction of many sequences is extremely skillful, and the acting performances are masterful. Yet the film is very dangerous because it sentimentally reaffirms American patriotism and heroism by seriously distorting

history. The fact that it is receiving such critical acclaim (winning both the New York Critics Award and the Oscar for the best picture of the year) makes it even more dangerous. Rather than launching a new standard of American film-making as Farber claims, I fear that *The Deer Hunter*, like *Midnight Express*, heralds a new wave of reactionary jingoism. This fear is shared by many others—particularly the Vietnam vets who picketed the film at the Academy Awards.

Admirers of the film claim by some tortuous logic that, despite the Vietnam sequences that lie at its center, *The Deer Hunter* is in no way political. Some suggest the battle scenes could have been from any war, but the fact is Cimino chose Vietnam and a realistic mode of presentation. Of course we must grant him his subject, but he is morally responsible to deal with the issues inherent in that material. Kroll praises *The Deer Hunter* as “the first film to look at Vietnam not politically, but as the manifestation of an endemic murderousness.” Endemic” to whom, one wonders? The murderousness is shown to reside *only* in the Viet Cong, and we are supposed to believe this “artistic” choice has no political implications. Farber’s reasoning is even more incredible.

In the Vietnam sequences of *The Deer Hunter*, Cimino never tries to justify American involvement; he simply observes the human consequences from the point of view of the American soldier. Art is always apolitical; the one and only enemy of art is cant. Cimino’s refusal to be constrained by the leftwing interpretation of the Vietnam war may be what allows him to render the full, devastating impact of the experience. He isn’t making the movie for Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden; his only loyalty is to the truth.

Unfortunately Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden are not the only ones who have heard about the My Lai Massacre. To live in America through the sixties *without being aware* of the opposition to the war or of the charges of war crimes against the American and South Vietnamese military forces was virtually impossible—even in a small steel town like Clairton, Pennsylvania, yet the characters in the film have no such awareness. Do these omissions imply that the incidents are insignificant? That they never really happened? Or that DeNiro and his friends simply didn’t know about them and were a lot better off as a consequence?

No film dealing with war, or really with any

form of human interaction, can possibly escape political implications. It’s ironic that *The Deer Hunter* should be compared with the work of Renoir; for in *The Grand Illusion* and *The Rules of the Game* he explores complex situations with all of their contradictions—and despite his full knowledge of corruption, pain, betrayal, and the best intentions, without self-righteous judgments or a detached cynicism, Renoir still affirms human life. It is precisely this comprehensive moral perspective that defines Renoir’s humanistic politics and that is missing in Cimino. *The Deer Hunter* purposely narrows the truth not only about the war, but also about the human relationships it depicts.

The Deer Hunter does not glorify war. No, it confirms that war is hell for anyone exposed to the experience. The distortion comes in the way the film defines the particular nature of that hell. It suggests the reason the war is so grim is that it draws Americans away from their wholesome small-town life—away from the camaraderie of romantic buddyhood, away from the majestic mountains and peaceful woods, away from the communal rituals of festive weddings, exhilarating hunts, and somber funerals. It draws them to treacherous jungles where they are subjected to inhuman atrocities committed by an alien race. There they become pawns in a game of Russian roulette where Viet Cong soldiers and foreign profiteers callously gamble with their lives. In the opening war footage, DeNiro, as a heroic green beret ranger, takes revenge against a Vietnamese who massacres innocent villagers, purging him from the earth with a flame thrower. Except for this and similar acts of valiant retaliation by DeNiro, *all* of the atrocities are committed by the Viet Cong. Of course, the film does acknowledge that the Vietnamese people are the ones who suffer the most, but neither the main characters nor the film-makers are primarily concerned with their misery. Rather, it is used as “production value” in the war scenes to make them look more authentic. What the film is concerned about is the fate of the three young buddies from a small Pennsylvania steel town.

Back home, Steven (John Savage) is clearly the weakest of the three buddies. Although he manages to rebel against an over-protective, dominat-

ing mother (Shirley Stoler), he is drawn into a Russian Orthodox wedding by his pregnant girl friend (Rutanya Alda) despite his claims that he has never slept with her. When his buddies go hunting, he's left behind with his bride.

Michael (Robert DeNiro) is the strongest. Though he is admired for his bold recklessness and wild unpredictability, he is somewhat of an outsider in the group. We are not really sure whether he shares the Russian heritage with his friends. At Steven's wedding, he is the only one without a girl. We soon discover he is attracted to Linda (Meryl Streep), but we wonder whether it's because she is involved with Nick (Christopher Walken), the one buddy Michael really loves. We never find out. After the wedding, Michael tears off his clothes and runs through the cold city night, as if he is seized with a restless urge to start the great adventure. Although Nick follows, he is more attuned to the context than the impulse; he lovingly drapes his jacket over Michael's genitals, as if acknowledging the cold or perhaps the nudity makes him nervous.

Though he is as sensitive and full of vitality as Michael, Nick lacks his intense focus and his ability to turn a willful impulse directly into action. He mediates between Michael and Steven. At the wedding, Nick is the best man rather than the groom. The festive atmosphere leads him to propose to Linda, but we're not sure whether he actually means it, and neither is she. Whenever Nick is moving to music or relaxing with the boys, it's hard to watch anyone else on screen (even DeNiro), but there is an odd vagueness at the center of his personality, as if he is more absorbed in self reflection than in action. On the hunt, Nick takes more pleasure from the beauty of the trees and mountains than from the shooting. Yet he is the only companion trusted by Michael, who thinks the other guys are all "assholes." In turn, they question Michael's virility (one even accuses him of being a "faggot") and fail to understand his "pure" style of hunting (why he insists on taking only one shot). Apparently, they haven't read Hemingway and don't know this particular masculine code. Yet the writers—screenwriter Deric Washburn, who was aided on the story by Michael Cimino, Louis Garfinkle, and Quinn Redeker—probably have read, not only Papa, but the whole tradition of

American masculine literature that links hunting with war—e.g., Cooper's *Deerslayer*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Faulkner's *The Bear*, and Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* *The Deer Hunter* has several superficial similarities with Mailer's mock epic novel—the hunt on the eve of war, the two loving-buddies who make it with the same woman as a means of avoiding their homosexuality, the contrast between the couple of romantic hunters and the other "assholes," the exploration of the connection between American masculinity and our involvement in Vietnam. Yet, *The Deer Hunter* strips them (Cimino would probably prefer the word *purifies*) of all irony, so that the film is "straight as an arrow" in every sense of the term.

As soon as the scene shifts to Vietnam, the three buddies are immediately thrust into a desperate situation. Taken prisoner by the Viet Cong, they are forced to play Russian roulette as their captors gamble on who will shoot their brains out. There's a terrible contradiction here. While the game of roulette is dramatically effective in forcing the audience to experience the agony of waiting for the gun to go off, it also implies, as the central war metaphor, that the outcome is all a matter of chance. Yet the narrative shows us exactly the opposite. The Clairton sequences—particularly the wedding and the hunt—accurately predict how each of the three men will respond in this crisis. Steven, the weakling, is overwhelmed with raw terror and becomes totally dependent on Michael, whose manic recklessness now proves heroic. Nick mediates between the two—agreeing to play the game of roulette according to Michael's strategy but refusing to leave Steven behind. While the three buddies are being rescued by an army helicopter, Steven lets go and Michael dives into the river to save him. Only Nick is carried back to safety; yet he loses the moral support of his loving friend Michael, which he needs as badly as Steven. The buddy relationship that at times seemed superficial back home, proves to be essential to survival on the battlefields of Nam.

Once out of the combat zone, the character differences in the three buddies are even more decisive in determining their fates. The cowardly Steve loses his limbs and hides out in a veterans' hospital so that his family and friends won't

see his deformity. The sensitive Nick has a mental breakdown, goes AWOL, and becomes addicted to heroin and Russian roulette. Only the heroic Michael returns from Nam completely intact, his uniform decorated with medals and his character improved by the war. He becomes a more responsible person who not only persuades Steven to come home from the veterans' hospital but also valiantly tries to save Nick from decadence, even risking a return to Vietnam and another round at Russian roulette. At home, Michael feels an even greater alienation from those who haven't experienced the war, but he ceases to be reckless because he knows what real courage is in life-and-death situations. When alone on the mountain, he decides not to shoot the deer. He's had enough killing. Michael's development from manic recklessness to a rich savoring of experience is a direct reversal of Nick's movement from a joyful passion for life to a zombie-like indifference to death. It is Michael's growing respect for life that helps him to replace Nick in the relationship with Linda. His behavior in bed is as pure as on the hunt. Not wanting to waste himself on sluts, he has saved his one shot for a natural doe-eyed beauty. He answers the earlier charges of homosexuality, not with empty words, but with manly action. Yet since the love scenes are so ambiguous, we may suspect that Linda is less satisfied than the deer.

By reaffirming Michael as a strong, silent man of action who succeeds in surviving a hellish war, the film implies that the war depends primarily on individual acts of will. It suggests that Michael is superior, not only to his buddies, but also to the thousands of others who died, were maimed, or were psychically damaged. It allows Michael to be proud of his uniform and medals without having to take into account the broader issues of the US role in the war and the atrocities committed by our side. Within the film's own structure, the place to bring in this larger perspective would have been in the character of Nick. If his mental breakdown had been linked with this broader understanding of the political context instead of blamed on a character flaw, then the ending would have had a totally different meaning. This omission weakens the film—both dramatically in understanding Nick's deterioration and thematically in handling the Vietnam war.

At the beginning of the film, Michael and Nick were both presented as potential heroes—the bold and the sensitive. In killing off Nick, Cimino seems to be purging the American male of his self-destructiveness and doubts—doubts that have arisen partly as a result of the decline of America as a world power and partly in response to the sexual assault from the Women's Movement and Gay Liberation. Nick's death frees Michael to succeed sexually with Linda and achieve a heroism without irony. The kind of heroism we expect from a John Wayne, not from a Robert DeNiro who has formerly played the neurotic anti-hero. Many American males apparently welcome this revival, for its heralds a resurgence of pride in their manhood just in the nick of time.

The film ends with all of Nick's friends assembled for his funeral, the final tragic ritual that balances the comic wedding ritual in the first half of the film. It's a grim occasion, similar to the scene following the hunt on the eve of the buddies' departure for Vietnam. The men had gathered in Welsh's bar, the local hangout, drinking beer and acting rowdy as usual. Then John (George Dzundza) went to the piano and played some Chopin that powerfully expressed what all of them were feeling. This was effective because the shallow stereotyped buddy relationship, with all of its competitive bickering and noisy posturing, suddenly was revealed to have other dimensions of sincere feeling and sensitivity. The music succeeded in communicating what would have been too corny to express in words; and in embodying the refined culture that is destroyed by the deafening explosions of the war scenes that immediately follow. In the funeral sequence, the film-makers use the same strategy, but this time it does not work. The mourners are looking for a similar ritual, which will enable them to accept Nick's death. They are sitting around a table, about to share a meal. John goes to start the scrambled eggs and begins, almost unconsciously, to hum "God Bless America." The others join in, at first softly, and then together they sing the song, reaffirming their love for Nick and their own sense of community. But how can this be reassuring when this affirmation rises out of ignorance? On a dramatic level, the mourners have

no more idea than we do of why Nick died; and on an historical level, they have very limited knowledge of the war in Vietnam. Like the deer hunt and the game of Russian roulette, the dirge is merely an empty ritual that is hollow and deadly.

—MARSHA KINDER

EASTERN WESTERN

Although the recent flurry of Vietnam movies, with Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* still promised, might suggest the possibility of a new genre, "the Eastern," that is not Michael Cimino's goal. Instead of trying to transcend the Western, *The Deer Hunter* accepts its chivalric values (male bonding, honor, martial skill) and its defense of the imperial progress being forced on "native" or "savage" cultures. Cimino does enlarge the Western's locale, and his film is powerful and effective, but it is also fatally oversimplified. His difficulties proceed from the particularly naive version of Western conventions he tries to revive.

Beside its Oscar, *The Deer Hunter* has also raised a political furor. Peter Arnett, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his Vietnam correspondence, has complained that Cimino has invented an epic of innocence, in which white middle-class Americans are brutalized by Vietnamese torturers. In fact, the Americans portrayed are very pointedly ethnic working-class figures and Cimino, who still claims he was making an antiwar statement, seems to locate the brutality of the war in its absurdity. Most of the Vietnamese we see are in bewildered retreat; their actions are intended to seem as pointless as the Russian roulette game the Americans are forced to play.

The Russian-American steel town readying its boys for war has most of the virtues sentimentally attributed to organic, premodern communities. Its citizens are united by ethnic roots, orthodox religion, and unaffected love for each other. The stereotype is a familiar one, and is generally offered without condescension. Except that it is consistent with Western convention, less can be said for Cimino's portrayal of Vietnamese culture only as it would have appeared to his three American heroes. And, no matter how chillingly the Russian roulette motif reminds us that for indi-

viduals war has long been an absurd gamble with fortune, it is still silly to blame the war for violating the heroes' innocence. They had been had long before that.

James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo (a.k.a. Leatherstocking and Hawkeye, played long ago by Gary Cooper) is like Mike (Cimino's deer-hunter, played by Robert DeNiro) a deerslayer who became a manslayer. Natty would have preferred to confine his rifle virtuosity to the aesthetic pursuit of deer, but he is trapped in the clash between white and red cultures, and finally must kill to protect himself. With something like Mike's passion for the one-shot kill, Natty insists that he is "a slayer, but no slaughterer." Both men are chaste despite temptations, and both willingly risk everything to rescue their sworn companions from the fiendish tortures of natives resisting white invasion. Both are also limited by their class status. Cooper allows Natty to criticize the social order being installed in the frontier, but denies him the love of women above his station. Mike, less reflective than Natty, wins love, but is deprived of the more modern prerequisite of middle-class status, a student deferment.

The problem with the Cooper-Cimino Western is that it asks us to suspend our knowledge of history, and ignore the realities of social structure. All those cattle drives to Abilene fed workers being crowded into newly industrializing cities. Canned meat also sustained the soldiers already being sent to new frontiers in the Caribbean and the Pacific. And, just as white men taught Indians to take scalps, US troops taught Filipinos to administer water torture. That the Rough Riders became the most visible heroes of the invasion of Cuba only underlines the irony of the Western. These cowboy soldiers had Ivy League polo players for officers and their colonel, Teddy Roosevelt, an indisputable aristocrat, welcomed his troops' frontier experience "in the battle between savagery and civilization," but spent most of his time trying to improve their discipline. Neither Cooper nor Cimino wants to consider the people and forces really in control. They want us to identify with their heroes as natural aristocrats in still unspoiled wilderness domains.

The Western is not, of course, necessarily naive. Since Cimino does toy with some of the